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\$100 Million Is Committed For Jetliner Security Plan

By PHILIP SHENON

The Bush administration has decided to commit \$100 million to the first phase of development of an antimissile system that could be installed in passenger airplanes, a far larger research investment than the administration has discussed publicly, senior administration officials said today.

The officials said the size of the two-year research budget, which is \$40 million beyond the initial \$60 million proposed in Congress, reflects the continuing fear among intelligence agencies that Al Qaeda plans to try again to use its arsenal of shoulder-fired missiles to bring down Western passenger planes.

Last year, terrorists believed to have been associated with Al Qaeda tried to shoot down an Israeli passenger jet on takeoff from the Kenyan coastal city of Mombasa; the two shoulder-fired missiles barely missed the Boeing 757. This year, the administration dispatched teams of inspectors to major international airports around the world to determine if American jetliners would be vulnerable to missile attack on takeoff or landing.

In a proposal issued on Monday to defense contractors, the Department of Homeland Security, which will oversee the project, said that it had begun an "aggressive" effort to develop prototypes of antimissile systems for commercial planes based on existing technology used on military planes, including electronic jamming equipment. Many American military planes, including Air Force One, are outfitted with jamming equipment and flares intended to deflect heat-seeking missiles.

"This program is not intended to develop new technologies, but rather migrate existing technologies from the military environment to the commercial airline industry," the proposal said, noting that the budget for the two-year project would be "approximately \$100 million."

The decision to seek \$100 million for the antimissile research drew cautious praise on Capitol Hill from a bipartisan group of lawmakers who have proposed legislation that would require the government to spend billions of dollars to install militarylike antimissile systems on thousands of commercial planes.

"This is a good, small step," said Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York

and one of the sponsors of the bill. "But we need to be taking some bigger steps to make ourselves safe from international terrorism."

A House sponsor, Representative Steve Israel, a Long Island Democrat, agreed that while the decision to commit \$100 million to the project was "a sign that the administration has begun to recognize the need to protect commercial aircraft," the government still needed to move quickly "to install shoulder-fired missile defenses on each and every one of the 6,800 commercial airplanes, sooner rather than later."

The Bush administration has suggested that a decision to outfit commercial planes may be years away. And in the proposal to defense contractors, the Homeland Security Department requested only that prototypes be manufactured. Defense industry officials say that it would cost \$1 million to \$2 million to outfit a commercial plane with the sort of antimissile technology now used in the Pentagon's fleet.

Intelligence agencies have cited a flurry of reports in recent months suggesting that terrorists affiliated with Al Qaeda may be planning new attacks using small, shoulder-fired missiles, which are known to be in the terrorist network's arsenal and which can be purchased on the international arms market for as little as a few thousand dollars each.

Earlier this year, several western airlines shut down service to Kenya after intelligence reports there suggested the possibility of a new missile attack in East Africa. Last month, a British arms dealer was arrested in New Jersey and charged with attempting to sell a Russian-made shoulder-fired missile to an undercover agent posing as an agent of Al Qaeda.

Foreign airlines are also reported to be considering antimissile technology for their planes, including British Airways, which disclosed this month that it was in talks with aircraft manufacturers about the installation of devices that could protect its jets from attack.

In its proposal to contractors, the Department of Homeland Security said it would consider having several companies conduct research on antimissile technology, with two competitors eventually chosen to develop prototypes for testing. The department has requested an additional \$2 million from Congress to establish a special office to oversee the project.